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2014

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/haokip/13/

Asian Ethnicity, 2014
Vol. 15, No. 3, 302–316, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2013.853545

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Inter-ethnic relations in Meghalaya

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The Indian state of Meghalaya, since its creation in 1972, had been raven by ethnic conflicts between the indigenous tribes and settler non-tribal communities. The domination of business establishments, labour force and other employment opportunities by settlers who are mainly economic migrants from Bangladesh, Nepal and other parts of India resulted in anxiousness among the native locals, resulting in three ethnic riots between indigenous tribals and settler non-tribal communities. By the turn of the twentieth century the state witnessed a relative change in the nature of relations between the ethnic communities. While the relations between the indigenous tribals and settler communities have relatively improved, ethnic tensions shifted to the indigenous tribes. This article uses the perceived threat hypothesis and a combination of rational choice theory and interpretivism to explain empirically observed realities in Meghalaya. Emphasis is placed on the post-1992 period, focusing on the emerging ethnic relations between the indigenous tribes of Meghalaya.

Keywords: Inter-ethnic relations; Meghalaya; Khasi; Garo; Jaintia; Nepali; Kuki; Rabha

Introduction

Meghalaya is located in the Northeastern corner of India's troubled periphery. Since independence the Northeastern region has been beset with persisting assertions of ethnic nationalism against the Indian state. Such nationalism mainly manifested in the formation of insurgent groups demanding various levels of autonomy within the Indian state to sovereignty. Within the region there exists an intractable divide between the tribals, who mostly settle in the hill areas, and the non-tribal valley dwellers.

Meghalaya is a relatively peaceful state compared to some other Northeastern states, such as Manipur, Nagaland and Assam, which have a host of insurgent groups. Nonetheless, the state has been raven by ethnic conflicts between the indigenous tribals and the settler non-tribal communities since its formation in 1972. The steady rise of economic migrants, mainly non-tribals from Bangladesh, Nepal and other parts of India, resulted in uneasiness among the locals. These migrants began to dominate business establishments, labour force and other employment opportunities. As a result the state witnessed ethnic riots between indigenous tribals and migrant non-tribal communities in 1979, 1987 and 1992. However, since the mid-1990s there has been a relative change in the nature of ethnic relations between the communities of the state. Although the relations

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The first draft of this article was presented at the national seminar on 'Social Research on North East India: Issues and Challenges', organised by North East India Study Programme, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi on 25–26 February 2010.

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between the tribals and non-tribals relatively improved, ethnic tensions shifted to the so-called indigenous tribes.

This article is divided into two parts. The first part discusses the theories of ethnicity that would guide in understanding the ethnic phenomena in Meghalaya, followed by a brief historical background of Meghalaya, the composition of various ethnic groups and some highly violent episodes of ethnic tensions in the state till 1992. The latter part deals with the emerging ethnic relations in Meghalaya since 1993.

Key concepts and theories

There is no agreement on the definition of ethnicity as to what constitutes an ethnic group and this disagreement leads to the development of various theories on ethnicity. The same problem appears while trying to define ethnic conflict as well. Horowitz states that 'ethnic groups are defined by ascriptive differences, whether the indicum is colour, appearance, language, religion, some other indicator of origin or some combination thereof.'[1] Even though the primordial attributes of ethnicity are important in the construction of ethnic groups, it does not help explain the conflict phenomena.

The rational choice theory treats 'human beings' as 'rational and motivated by self-interest in their everyday actions', and 'although the actions of actors may be restricted by their experience and social norms, their behaviour can regularly be explained in reference to their need to try to maximise their advantages'.[2] As such this theory explains 'ethnic dynamics by looking at ethnicity as means or resource mobilised in pursuit of particular material objectives. It assumes that the emerging social forces – be it middle class or ethnic elite – which attained hegemony over the rest of the community, consciously use ethnic identities as resources to promote group or sectional interests'.[3]

The rational choice theory has significant limitations when applied to the study of ethnic conflict in unstable politics. However, when combined with interpretivism this approach overcomes many of its limitations.[4] This is because interpretivists succeed where the rational choice theory fails. 'By focusing on the role of culture and the creation of political communities, they address the kinds of issues that pose challenges to rational-choice analysis'.[5] 'Interpretivist accounts illuminate the power of ideas, the influence of history, the significance of intellectuals and the persuasive power of political rhetoric and dramaturgy. Rational choice analysis helps to explain the mechanisms that account for the impact of these political forces'.[6] The limits of the rational choice theory are unfettered by interpretivism, which locates the meaning of ethnic conflict within the context of the politics of culture and transition. Specifically, ethnic conflict can be explained by elites gambling for resurrection, which then snowballs into a security dilemma.[7] As such the article considers the perceived threat hypothesis and a combination of the rational choice theory of ethnicity and interpretivism to explain the ethnic phenomena in Meghalaya.

Brief history of Meghalaya

Meghalaya, which literally means 'abode of clouds' in Sanskrit, consists of the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills. The British rulers annexed the Khasi Hills in 1833, Jaintia Hills in 1835 and Garo Hills in 1872–73. During the British rule the Khasi Hills consisted of 25 Khasi states. The British Government recognised the 25 Khasi states and categorised them as semi-independent and dependent. With the conquest of the Khasi Hills, Shillong was made the capital of British Assam in 1864. These annexations brought about historic changes in the demography, polity and economy of the state with the gradual decay of

feudal institutions and the rise of capitalist economic entities as witnessed in other parts of India's Northeastern region.[8]

The state is the product of a movement for the formation of an Eastern Hill State consisting of all the hill areas and the contiguous areas inhabited by people of the same racial stock in Assam after India's independence. When the tribal people in the Northeastern region began taking a more vocal interest in their own future as early as in April 1945, the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo people also voiced such concerns. In contrast to the Central Indian government, which has been following pluralist policies in relation to the various linguistic, religious and other minorities in the country, the Assam government pursued assimilative and discriminatory policies in relation to the minority groups.[9] As a result, the movement for a separate administrative unit was initiated by a section of Khasi and Garo elites, emphasising their 'difference from the plains people and blamed Assamese for trying to impose their culture and language on the hill-tribes and for attempts to dominate in legislature and services'.[10] They also pointed out that autonomy granted under the Sixth Schedule was not real and substantial. Various plans, such as the Scottish Plan, Nehru Plan and the Pataskar Commission, were formulated to solve the unrests in the hill areas of Assam.

In 1969, the Indira Gandhi government intended to fulfil the long-standing demands of the hill tribes by providing them an autonomous state within the state of Assam covering all the autonomous districts of Assam, i.e., the Garo Hills, Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Mikir Hills (Karbi Anglong), North Cachar Hills (Dima Hasao) and Lushai Hills districts. However, the tribes in North Cachar Hills and Mikir Hills were not enthusiastic about the movement and preferred to remain within Assam. The Mizos of Lushai Hills district wanted to have a separate state and launched their own movement. The Assam Reorganisation (Meghalaya) Act of 1969 provided Meghalaya, which comprises the United Khasi–Jaintia Hills district and the Garo Hills district, with an autonomous state that came into effect on 2 April 1970. Subsequently it became a full-fledged state of India on 21 January 1972, with the passing of the North Eastern Areas (Re-Organisation) Act, 1971.

Social composition

Meghalaya is predominantly a tribal state. The term 'scheduled tribes' (STs) is used in the administrative sense to denote the tribals in India. There are a total of 17 notified STs in Meghalaya. The generally recognised indigenous tribes of the state consist of three major ethnic communities: the Khasi, the Jaintia and the Garo. The term Khasi is used in a generic sense, which includes the Khasi, the Jaintia, the War and the Bhoi, and they are collectively known as the *Hynniewtrep* people. They belong to the Austro-Asiatic language group and are mainly found in the East, West and South West Khasi Hills Districts, the Ri-Bhoi district and the East and West Jaintia Hills districts. In July and August 2012, four new districts were carved out from the seven previous districts for administrative convenience.[11] The Jaintias, also called *Pnars*, mainly settle in the Jaintia Hills. The Garos belong to the Bodo family of the Tibeto–Burman race and primarily settle in the western part of the state. They also called themselves *Achiks* and their land as *Achik* land. Apart from these three major tribes there are several tribal populations who have been settled in the state since its inception. They are Bodo-Kacharis, Hajongs, Hmars, Rabhas, Dimasa-Kacharis, Mikir, any Mizo (Lushai) tribes, any Naga tribes, various Kuki tribes, etc. The non-tribal communities comprise Bengalis, Marwaris, Nepalis and a small number of communities from different parts of India.

According to the Indian Census of 2001, the population of Meghalaya was 23,18,822, which increased to 29,66,889 in the 2011 Census.[12] The 17 notified STs of the state consist of 2,555,861 persons in 2011, constituting about 86.1% of the total state population.[13] The remaining 14.1% of the population is non-tribal. The Khasis constitute 49.54%, followed by the Garos with 30.86%. The composition of some of the STs in Meghalaya, according to the 2001 Census, is given below.

Name of the tribe	Total population	Proportion to total ST population
All scheduled tribes	1,992,862	100%
Khasi	1,123,490	56.4
Garo	689,639	34.6
Hajong	31,381	1.6
Rabha	28,153	1.4
Koch	21,381	1.1
Synteng	18,342	0.9
Mikir	11,399	0.6
Any Kuki tribes	10,085	0.5
Any Mizo (Lushai) tribes	3526	0.2
Any Naga tribes	3138	0.2
Bodo Kachari	2932	0.1
Hmar	1146	0.1

Source: Office of the Registrar General, India, 2001.

Inter-ethnic relations: 1972–1992

The relation between the three major communities and other smaller tribes in Meghalaya was relatively cordial till the first half of the 1990s. Ethnic tensions that erupted in the state from 1972 to 1992 were mainly between the indigenous tribals and non-tribal 'settler' communities. It is believed that the cause of such rising tensions was the fear of the major indigenous tribes, i.e., the Khasis, the Jaintias and the Garos, being swamped demographically, culturally as well as economically by the non-tribals.[14]

The migration of non-tribals into the present state of Meghalaya dates back to the early days of British colonial occupation of the Northeastern region. The Bengali migrants came in the state along with the British between 1863 and 1866 to serve as clerks in the colonial administration. The Nepalese, also known as Gorkhas,[15] constitute one of the other major migrants in Meghalaya. They were recruited in the British army, and also as watchman and peon to assist the colonial administration. After retirement from the British services many of them preferred to stay back and settle there permanently. In the subsequent years many Nepalese immigrated into the Northeastern region as graziers, cultivators and herdsmen in the hill slopes. They were more or less unnoticed because they preferred to settle in the forest areas near the foothills.[16] Starting with mean business, the Nepalese began to occupy large chunks of grasslands and paddy fields in course of time. Currently, they are mostly engaged in cattle rearing and tending cows for milk supply. A large number of them are also employed as chowkidars (watchman/gatekeeper) and peons in various governmental and private institutions.

The non-tribals migrants were encouraged to conduct business in the state. As a result, within a span of a few years they began to control business and occupy most of the important commercial areas, and governmental and financial institutions. During the colonial period there 'was no sense of any adversarial discord between the "settler"

community and the "indigenous" community, on the contrary it exhibits an era of shared experiences buttressed by common trade, friendship and a cultural space. Of course this might have been possible because the common "adversary" of the settlers and the indigenous members were the British and as such narration about that period depicts mutually desired and cooperative interactions between the settler and the indigenous members'.[17]

However, the second phase of migration in the post-independence period, especially from Bangladesh, invoked a sense of insecurity among the local populace. In the wake of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, many Bengalis from Sylhet were allocated settlement area by the then government of Meghalaya headed by B.B. Lyngdoh. The legal migrants were settled in different parts of Shillong, in areas designated as revenue plots.[18]

The Khasi-Jaintias and non-tribals in Jaintia Hills districts and in the interior parts of Khasi Hills have been living together in harmony. Even in Jowai, the administrative headquarters of West Jaintia Hills district, there is cordial relation between the native locals and non-tribals. The relatively small number of non-locals and the economy being controlled by the local people in terms of trade and commerce may be attributed to this harmony.[19] In fact, many of the Nepalis and Biharis employed in the coal mines of Jaintia Hills married native-local girls. Some migrant Bangladeshis have also permanently settled in these places, without any tension erupting between the native locals and the Bangladeshis.

Tension between the tribals and non-tribals mainly erupted in the state capital, Shillong. Within 8 years since the creation of the state, Shillong witnessed a violent riot between the non-tribals and the dominant tribal groups of the state. In 1979, a major riot broke out during a Hindu religious celebration, which quickly turned into a conflict between tribals and non-tribals.[20] In this violence significant sections of the Bengali community were shifted to safer places in successive waves, which reduced their visible presence and influence in the state. In 1987, another riot took place when Nepali coal mine workers were expelled from Meghalaya by agitating Khasi Students' Union (KSU), leading to group clashes between the Khasis and the Nepalis. Six people were killed in the clashes, 65 injured and there was an exodus of thousands of Nepalis from Meghalaya, besides millions worth of properties being destroyed. Again in 1992, the KSU agitation turned violent, leading to clashes between Khasis and Nepalis. Yet another riot broke out 'on the issue of trade licenses to non-tribals in October 1992 when the Federation of Khasi (Jaintia) and Garo People (FKJGP) demanded closure of more than 1500 non-tribal establishments and suspension of trade licenses of non-tribals in wholesale trading'.[21]

The influx of foreigners and the fear of the native populace being swamped demographically by the migrants have been purported to be the root causes of ethnic schisms and the cleavages between tribals and non-tribals initially. However, census reports of the declining non-tribal population since the creation of Meghalaya prove them to be myths rather than realities.[22] The non-tribal population has declined from 19.5% in 1971 to 19.42% in 1981, 14.47% in 1991, 14.1% in 2001 and further to 13.9% in 2011.

The Sarma Commission, appointed by the Government of Meghalaya to investigate the ethnic conflicts in Shillong from August to October 1992, observed that:

> …the primary cause of such disturbances is economic. Since independence there has been substantial increase in the tribal population of the state. With the spread of education the number of educated unemployed has gone up. Even those boys and girls who do not have any higher education are after some salaried jobs. Most of them have become adverse to manual labour. They do not want to go for agriculture, horticulture or any other work involving manual labour. There has been some sort of exodus of the rural tribal people from villages to

> the towns particularly to Shillong seeking avenues of employment. Practically there has been no industrial development in the state, for what ever reason it may be. Had there been growth in industry some of the unemployed youth could have been employed. Employment in Government offices and also in the banks, insurances, etc. has reached a point of saturation as there are all non-productive works. In view of such position in the employment market, the attention of the younger generation has naturally turned towards business, where the number of non-tribals is quite significant. The tribal youth, it seems, are out to oust many of them as possible and to occupy their places.[23]

Inter-ethnic relations since 1993

The period since 1993 has seen a relatively cordial relation between the tribal and non-tribal communities in the state. However, there emerged periodic estrangements between the tribal communities of the state. The causes of such estrangements range from minor incidents to policies adopted by the three major communities of the state, and which are, in most cases, subsequently upheld by the state government to protect their economic interests, identity and land.

In 2000, KSU launched the *Ksan rngiew* movement, which is not a public agitation but an instrument to rejuvenate and rouse the Khasi people to strive ahead with hope and expectation of a brighter future.[24] Some of the main demands of this movement placed before the government were as follows:

- Immediately control influx of people from elsewhere by implementing the Inner Line Regulation System, the work permit and the acceptance of 1951 as the cut-off year to remove the names of foreigners.
- Generate tens of thousands of jobs in different departments for the unemployed.
- Reserve employment opportunities 60:40 for the Khasi-Jaintias and Garos, respectively.
- Amend the Land Transfer Act to prevent tribals from other states from acquiring lands in Meghalaya and to abolish power of attorney to acquire land.

The latter half of 2013 witnessed a series of agitations in the form of 'public bandh', called by various civil society and student organisations, including KSU, FKJGP and Garo Students' Union (GSU), protesting against the non-implementation of the Inner Line Permit (ILP) system.[25] Notably, the Lanong Committee on Influx in Meghalaya submitted its report to the state government in October 2012 recommending the implementation of ILP in the state to control influx. However, the Chief Minister of Meghalaya Mukul Sangma outrightly rejected the implementation of ILP in the state while not ruling out the possibility of the presence of illegal migrants in the state. Deploring the ILP system he emphatically remarked that 'Meghalaya will not piggy ride on such outdated colonial acts', and questioned the basis for the adoption a mechanism that 'has not been effective in checking illegal influx into Arunachal, Mizoram and Nagaland'. He reiterated the need for a more effective legislation that would boost up the existing tenancy and landholding acts to check the menace of illegal influx while ensuring legal citizens an easy entry into the state.[26]

It appears from the debate that the pro-ILP activists wanted a complete shield of the state from illegal migrants through the implementation of the ILP system at any cost. Others consider the concerns about influx, to a great extent, as psychological and regarded the demand as 'the half-baked idea of some Khasi chauvinists'. They also question whether Meghalaya is prepared for a long-term crisis where the thriving education sector

and tourism industry will go down if the ILP system is implemented.[27] To the settler communities 'the very rhetoric of the ILP seekers has an anti-non-tribal overtone' for which they are scared of another 1979 riot.

Meghalaya Land Transfer Act

Concerned with the loopholes in the Meghalaya Land Transfer Act of 1971, the Congress-led Meghalaya United Alliance set up a committee in August 2009 under the chairmanship of Deputy Chief Minister Bindo Lanong to assess the pros and cons of the Land Transfer Act and suggest ways to regulate any further alienation of indigenous land. Eight non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from the state, including the KSU and FKJGP, were part of the committee. The Khun Hynniewtrep National Awakening Movement (KHNAM), the political wing of KSU, also expressed concerns about the increasing presence of STs from other states of the region in Shillong.

The proposed amendment of this act by the Meghalaya government may be justified on the ground of land insecurity. There are large numbers of STs from the Northeastern region residing in Shillong and other parts of the state who are not indigenous, but their tribe is listed among the 17 recognised tribes of Meghalaya. As such, there is a need to clearly demarcate and identify the indigenous people of the state and non-indigenous people from other parts of the region even though they may belong to one of the tribes listed among the STs of the state; this will prevent abuse of the Land Transfer Act.

Demand for separate 'Khasi-Jaintia' and 'Garo' states

In the past two decades, there emerged the demand for separate 'Khasi-Jaintia' and 'Garo' states. In the Garo Hills, this demand has been put up by several Garo armed groups, both the banned and truce groups. Williamson Sangma was the architect of the Eastern Hill State, which eventually culminated in the formation of Meghalaya, and he became its first Chief Minister; however, after 34 years since the creation of Meghalaya, another prominent Garo leader P.A. Sangma demanded the creation of 'Garoland', a state to be carved out of Meghalaya for Garos, focusing on the development disparity in the state.

The tussle between the GSU and KSU over the transfer of Meghalaya Board of Secondary Education (MBOSE) office from Tura to the state capital Shillong made GSU openly demand for the creation of Garoland. The tension started over the fiasco in the distribution of examination papers by MBOSE, headquartered at Tura in Garo Hills, for students from Shillong in the Khasi-dominated area. This prompted KSU to demand the bifurcation of MBOSE with the appointment of a secretary each for Tura and Shillong, and a full-fledged chairman. The KSU called a three-day bandh on the issue between 23 and 25 June 2005, affecting normal life in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The agitating KSU activists also torched government vehicles and properties.[28] The protest by GSU over the Megahalaya government's plan to bifurcate MBOSE led to the death of scores of student protesters in police firing to quell the protest. With such a tragic incident the Garo students believe that their interests would be protected and best served only with a separate statehood. The tussle ended with the establishment of the MBOSE Shillong office, but the scar of the tussle still lingers and haunts the social and political fabric now and then. The GSU termed the visit of the then Meghalaya Chief Minister D.D. Lapang, along with his council of ministers to the Garo Hills districts after the tension to assess the development of the region, as a 'futile exercise' that did not provide any assurance for overall development.[29] The student union also expressed their resentment over Lapang's

announcement that the Koch community in the state would be given indigenous tribe status.

Militancy in Meghalaya first appeared in Garo Hills to root out injustice and corruption. In 1992, radical elements of KSU formed a militant outfit and named it Hynniewtrep Achik Liberation Council (HALC). This militant outfit was engaged in extortions from non-tribals and restricted their movements. They also demanded secession from the Indian state and the return to the pre-independence status of the Khasi–Jaintia states.[30] Within a short span of their existence HALC split into Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC)[31] and Achik Liberation Matgrik Army (ALMA) on their difference over reservation. The proscribed Achik National Volunteers Council (ANVC) was formed in December 1995, demanding the creation of an independent 'Achik land' consisting of the five districts of Garo Hills in Meghalaya, large parts of Kamrup and Goalpara districts of Assam and Garo-inhabited areas of Northern Bangladesh. Whereas the Garo National Council (GNC)[32] and Achik National Congress (ANC), both Garo-based political parties, favoured the idea of a separate Garo state, the Hill State People's Democratic Party (HSPDP), the Khasi–Jaintia-based party, wants a Khasi–Jaintia state.

Deletion of certain STs from the list

As a part of its effort to regulate alienation of indigenous land, the state government proposed deleting certain STs from the existing list of STs in the state, leading to an agitation of the indigenous minorities living in the state. The unobtrusiveness of the Kuki tribes in the state along with some other tribes may be the cause of such a move by the government of Meghalaya. In this regard the Any Kuki tribes of Meghalaya under the aegis of Kuki Welfare Committee, Shillong, submitted a memorandum to the then Chef Minister Donkupor Roy in 2008 and appealed for the protection and retention of 'Any Kuki Tribes' in the list of the STs of Meghalaya.[33] They argued that the Kukis have been living even before the formation of the then United Khasi and Jaintia Hills in 1951 and at present there are more than 20 Kuki (Biate and Vaiphei) villages in Jaintia Hills alone. They also fervently put forward that in addition to Kuki settlements in Jaintia Hills, many of them have been living in Shillong and other parts of the state as indigenous and permanent residents ever since the creation of Meghalaya, although their existence has not been widely recognised.[34] Owing to their constant insecurity as a result of their minority status in the state, the Biates have been perpetually hiding their identity.[35] They are unable to exert their identity openly due to fear of being tormented, subdued and even their properties (both movable and immovable) being seized by the majority community. Indeed such incidents have occurred a couple of times in the recent past.[36]

Ronald Grigor Sunny maintains that 'in the actual world of group identifications and distinctions, a belief in sharp and relatively fixed distinctions between groups and predictable harmonies and homogeneities within groups gives a person an easy and reliable map of a complex and changing world. This kind of mental map provides a degree of predictability in an insecure world; it allows expectations of comfort with some and danger from others; and it permits different forms of treatment of those one considers like oneself from those who are considered different'.[37] Such a proposition, the distinction with predictable harmonies and not assimilation or oppression, needs to be maintained between the various tribes in Meghalaya, especially the minority 'others' who constantly insist to be identified. Living in a democratic system, they require a clearly defined, bounded population and the right to be represented.[38] The ethnic minorities can at least be

represented in various autonomous district councils of the state, if not in the state legislative assembly. This can give them a feeling of self-esteem despite being a minority.

Border dispute and Khasi–Karbi conflict

The border dispute between Meghalaya and Assam in the Meghalaya–Karbi Anglong sector took a critical turn in 2003 after the Khasi–Pnar residents living in Hamren accused Karbi militants of serving extortion notices to them. This precipitated in riots and displacement of both the Karbi and Khasi–Jaintia communities. The crisis remained unabated even after thousands of Khasi–Pnar villagers returned to their homes along the Assam–Meghalaya border. The Khasi–Pnar villagers continued to allege extortion demands from Karbi militants until the clash took a communal colour when KSU served quit notice to the Karbis living in Meghalaya as a retaliatory move. The villagers returned to Hamren after several rounds of discussion between Ri-Bhoi and Karbi Anglong district administrations.[39]

There was a raging controversy between the governments of Assam and Meghalaya over the exodus of villagers of Khasi–Jaintia origin who had settled in areas now claimed by Assam to be within Karbi Anglong, but which Meghalaya claim to be theirs. Another issue tending towards vigilantism is the order issued by the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council on 23 May 2005, asking residents of four villages inhabited by Khasis to vacate those villages by 31 May.[40] It repercuted in Shillong where a Karbi missionary youth was set ablaze, which led to the exodus of Karbis living in the state. The attack on Karbis was followed by the displacement of around 5000 Khasi-Pnars from sector 1 of Karbi Anglong district to Jaintia Hills. The Karbi students alleged that their fellow students in Shillong, Jowai and Ri-Bhoi district were harassed and tortured in the ethnic clashes with Khasi–Pnars.[41]

Garo–Rabha relations

The two-day bandh imposed by Rabhas on Christmas Eve in December 2009 demanding the Rabha Hasong state led to clashes between bandh supporters and Garo villagers, resulting in one death. The Garo villagers, who were moving on foot to the nearby markets for last-minute Christmas shopping, were obstructed and intimidated. The GNC questioned the bandh on Christmas Eve, stating that 'Such a strike is a serious insult to the Garo nationals residing in Goalpara and Kamrup areas of Assam and Meghalaya which has only one route between Tura and Shillong via Guwahati'.[42] The GNC also warned that continued provocations will lead to similar strikes that can be reciprocated during the festivals of the Rabhas, i.e., Damanu, Holi and Pujas.

Khasi–Nepali relations

In recent years, the bitter relations between the local tribals and the Nepalis have resurfaced with the discovery of many electoral identity cards obtained fraudulently. The local NGOs demand the scrapping of the 1950 Indo–Nepal Friendship Treaty, or at least to make it non-applicable in Meghalaya so as to stop influx from Nepal. In the light of the recent demand by various political parties of Nepal and the NGOs of Meghalaya for revision of the Treaty, it is pertinent to examine the Indo–Nepal Friendship Treaty, 1950.

The Treaty of Peace and Friendship between the Government of India and the Government of Nepal was signed at Kathmandu on 31 July 1950, by Chandreshwar

Prasad Narain Singh, the Indian ambassador in Nepal, on behalf of the Government of India and Mohan Shamsher Jang Bahadur Rana, Maharaja, Prime Minister and Supreme Commander-in-Chief of Nepal.[43] The Treaty has 10 articles that describe the condition of friendship of both countries, which include free movement of people and goods as well as the issuance of work permits. In recent years, dissidents have emerged, calling for a revision of the treaty. These include not only Indian Gorkhas and ethnic groups in Northeast India but also the Unified Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (UCPN-M). Terming some of the treaties between India and Nepal, including the Mahakali–Pancheshwar Treaty and the Peace and Friendship Treaty of 1950, as 'unequal treaties', Maoist supremo Pushpa Kamal Dahal, alias Prachanda, demands the scrapping of such treaties.[44] There is consensus among all political parties in Nepal 'that the earlier treaties were signed under different circumstances and since times have changed dramatically since then, a review of such agreements were imperative'.[45] After forming the government in 2008, the UCPN-M highlighted the need for revising the treaty.[46] On his visits to India as Prime Minister of 'New Nepal', twice in September and November 2011, Prachanda proposed a revision of the treaties, particularly the friendship treaty. The joint statement issued during his first visit agreed to review the treaties, including halting the recruitment of Gorkhas in the Indian army.

Article 6 of the Treaty states that:

> Each Government undertakes, in token of the neighbourly friendship between India and Nepal, to give to the nationals of the other, in its territory, national treatment with regard to participation in industrial and economic development of such territory and to the grant of concessions and contracts, relating to such development.

Article 7 of the Treaty reads:

> The Governments of India and Nepal agree to grant, on a reciprocal basis, to the nationals of one country in the territories of the other the same privileges in the matter of residence, ownership of property, participation in trade and commerce, movement and other privileges of a similar nature.

These provisions of the Treaty have helped the people of lesser industrialised and relatively underdeveloped Nepal to migrate without any barrier to a relatively industrialised and developing India. The laborious Nepali migrants in India are actively engaged in various economic activities and entrepreneurship. Nepali economic experts believe that revision of the Treaty will reduce Nepal's economic benefits reaped from remittances earned by Nepali migrant workers and Gorkha soldiers in India, which contributed considerably to the Nepalese Gross Domestic Product. They also believe that the Treaty has strengthened the scope of easy transference and access to the art, culture and literature of both countries.[47] Majority of the Indian Gorkhas feel that Article 7 of the Treaty has not clearly mentioned the status of Indian-origin Gorkhas and Nepalese.

On the other hand the NGOs in Meghalaya, in their bid to check Nepalese influx in the state, demanded the Indo–Nepal Treaty of Friendship to be non-applicable in the state. They alleged that the illegal migrants from Bangladesh, the entry of Nepali migrants due to the friendship treaty and migrant labourers from other Indian states have changed the demographic pattern of the state. They wanted 1971 as the base year for citizenship status for non-local residents of the state.[48]

In March 2012, the Nepali government sought to halt Gorkha recruitments in foreign armies. On 26 December 2011, the Parliamentary Committee on International Relations

and Human Rights approved the report 'Nepal's Foreign Policy in Changed Context: 2012', and later by the Legislature Parliament. On 9 March 2012, the Office of Prime Minister and Council of Ministers, Nepal, directed its Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) and other concerned ministries to implement the recommendations of a report that seeks to ultimately halt Gorkha recruitments in foreign armies. To the Nepalese government 'serving with foreign military had not allowed the country to hold its head high.'[49] Even though the Gorkhas serving in the Indian army contributed greatly to India's security, the halting of Gorkhas recruitment in the Indian army will provide avenues for abating the employment-starved Northeastern region.[50]

The visits of Prachanda seem to have reduced mutual suspicions and could usher in a new phase of bilateral relations, with potential for a mutually beneficial relationship.[51] India responded positively to the concerns of the Nepalese government but the bilateral issues need to be dealt in more maturely. It should take into account not only the national concerns in their effort to revise the treaty but also the concerns of Indian Gorkhas and the ethnic groups of Northeast India.

Conclusion

Conflicts in the Indian state of Meghalaya have shifted from the indigenous tribes and the settler communities to the indigenous tribal communities by the turn of the twentieth century, although the relations between indigenous tribes and the settler communities again continue to simmer in the recent years. The ethnic elites of the state have been creating a threat perception to gain support from their ethnic groups and shrewdly use this as a resource to fulfil group or sectional interests, and to maximise their advantages. This perceived threat has been instrumental in the policies and programmes of the civil society groups and even the state government posing an enduring challenge to the prospects of liberal democracy in the state.

With the increasing discourse on introducing a temporary work permit system to solve the supposedly unabated immigration from Bangladesh, this system was introduced in the state in October 2011 for not only immigrants from Bangladesh but also labourers from other parts of India. When the people of the Northeastern region have full freedom to work, reside and even acquire immovable properties in other parts of India, the regulation of movement for people from the mainland in some states of the region, including Meghalaya, and requiring work permit for manual labourers tantamount to treating them like foreigners. The concerns of the tribals in the region like protecting their identity, culture and land have to be addressed in other ways without restricting the movement of people across state borders.[52]

As against the perceived paranoia that migration has contributed towards the high level of instability in the state, leading to ethnic tensions between indigenous tribes and the settler populations, empirical data shows otherwise. The projected fear of the local communities being swamped by the settlers who are seen as upsetting the existing demographic balance in the state and provoking resentment on the part of the locals is a misapprehension. Although KSU raised a hue and cry over the illegal influx of Bangladeshis into Meghalaya, the *war* people of the Khasis also immigrate to Bangladesh.[53] The partition of India could not cut off trade between the trans-border tribes in Meghalaya and Bangladesh, besides large-scale smuggling in the border areas. The NGOs and other civil society organisations need to understand the existing economic relationship between peoples in the border areas and also ponder upon the other side of the story.

Given that economic insecurity, especially employment opportunities in the public sector, is the primary cause of tension between the majority indigenous communities in Meghalaya, equitable distribution of economic resources would be one giant step towards reducing discontentment in the backward areas of the state such as Garo Hills. Since the new millennium, various NGOs of the state intensified their movement to secure employment opportunities and check the influx of people from Bangladesh and other parts of India, and increasing land alienation. Of late, the spurt of land purchase by people from other states of the Northeastern region in Shillong has been their main concern. Hence, while employment opportunities is the main determining factor in maintaining the relations between the three major indigenous communities, the relationship between the three major communities and other ethnic minorities centres around the retention and recognition of their ethnic identities and existence in the state.

Notes on contributor

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Notes

1. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, 17.
2. Malesevic, *The Sociology of Ethnicity*, 95.
3. Srikanth and Ngaihte, "Notes on Ethnicity and Ethnic Identities in North-East India," 127.
4. Langridge, "Is Ethnic Conflict Rational."
5. Bates, de Figueiredo, and Wiengast, "The Politics of Interpretation," 605.
6. Ibid., 635.
7. Langridge, "Is Ethnic Conflict Rational."
8. Haokip, "Conceptualising Northeast India," 111.
9. Brass, *Language, Religion and Politics in North India*.
10. Kumar, *Re-Organisation of North-East India*, 37.
11. The North Garo Hills district, headquartered at Resubelpara, was the first among the four districts inaugurated on 27 July 2012, followed by East Jaintia Hills, with Khliehriat as its headquarters on 31 July 2012. The South West Khasi Hills district, which was mainly carved out from the West Khasi Hills district, was inaugurated on 3 August 2012, with its headquarters at Mawkyrwat. The fourth and last of the districts, the South West Garo Hills with its headquarters at Ampati, was inaugurated on 2 August 2012. The Chief Minister of Meghalaya Dr Mukul Sangma inaugurated the new districts and justified the creation of four new districts as the 'fulfilment of people's aspiration'.
12. The Census of India 2001 is used in this article for analysis of data as the 'Data Highlights' for Scheduled Tribes of Meghalaya for 2011 Census is yet to be published.
13. Government of India, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 'Demographic Status of Scheduled Tribe Population of India', 2011.
14. Lyngdoh and Gassah, "Decade of Inter-Ethnic Tension," 5024.
15. The term 'Nepalese' is used to represent people with Nepalese citizenship, whereas 'Nepali' is used to represent the Nepali-speaking Indian nationals. For further discussion on these two terms, see Khawas, 'Nepali vs. Nepalese'. The term 'Gorkha' is derived from a small town in Nepal called Gorkha, which is about 90 km from Kathmandu, where the British recruited men from Gorkha and subsequently formed the Gorkha Regiment. For details about the British and Gorkhas, see 'Gorkha History' http://www.khukuriblades.com/the_gurkhas/ (accessed September 8, 2013).

16. Gogoi, "The Migration Problem in Assam," 361.
17. Dev, "Narrative Claims and Identity Impasse."
18. Mukhim, "Turbulence in the Abode of Clouds," 7.
19. Lyngdoh, "Ethnicity, Religion and Language," 223.
20. For details, see Baruah, "Ethnic Conflicts and Traditional Self-Governing Institutions," 2.
21. Dhar, *Ethnic Unrest in India and Her Neighbours*, 80.
22. Das, "Migration, Ethnicity and Competition for State Resources," 321.
23. Reports of the Sarma Inquiry Commission relating to disturbances at Shillong in 1992.
24. Malngiang, "Students and Youth Organisations in Meghalaya," 180–1.
25. The ILP system is issued under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873. Under this system, Indian citizens are required to obtain this permit to enter the state of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram. This system is seen as an effective mechanism to control influx. Apart from a section of the Khasi, Jaintia and Garos, the Meiteis of Manipur have been demanding the implementation of this system in the state of Manipur. Also see 'CrPC 144 clamped in Shillong ahead of Inner Line Permit stir', *Hueiyen Lanpao*, September 2, 2013; 'Implement permit system in Meghalaya, says panel', *The Hindu*, October 17, 2012.
26. Bhattacharjee, "The Inner Line Divide."
27. As an educational hub for the Northeastern region many local people in Shillong thrive on the business of running schools, colleges and houses rented to students and various employees. The boom in tourism industry, apart from generating revenue for the state government, also has a positive impact on the hotels and transport services, besides spending on local food and other products by tourists.
28. 'Garoland Issue hots up in Meghalaya', *The Tribune*, July 4, 2005.
29. 'Lapang visit futile, says GSU', *The Shillong Times*, January 25, 2010.
30. Mukhim, "Turbulence in the Abode of Clouds," p. 8.
31. The proscribed HNLC aims to transform Meghalaya as a province exclusively for the Khasi–Jaintia people and free it from 'domination' by the Garos and from the alleged domination of the settler non-tribals, whom they call 'Dkhars'.
32. The GNC was formed as a political party by ethnic Garos to fight for the creation of Garoland to be carved out of the four Garo-dominated districts of Meghalaya.
33. The word 'Kuki' is a generic classification of ethnic groups that is spread throughout the Northeastern region of India, Northwest Burma and Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh. The Kuki Welfare Committee, Shillong, was reformed and renamed as Kuki Inpi, Meghalaya, in 2010.
34. Memorandum Submitted to Meghalaya Chief Minister by Kuki Welfare Committee, Shillong, in June 2008.
35. The Biates have close linguistic similarities with the Koms and Chirus, two old Kuki tribes of Manipur.
36. Haokip, "The Kuki Tribes of Meghalaya," 90.
37. Sunny, "Constructing Primordialism."
38. Rustow, "Transitions to Democracy," 337–63.
39. 'Villagers allege renewed extortion in Karbi Anglong', *Shillong Times*, May 8, 2007.
40. Mukhim, "Media-Bashing, CM Style."
41. *The Telegraph*, Northeast, November 20, 2003.
42. 'Tensions prevail in Rabha-Garo areas', *The Shillong Times*, December 23, 2010.
43. The Treaty came into force on July 31, 1950, as from the date of signature, in accordance with Article 9.
44. 'Prachanda blames India for Nepal's political crisis', *The Times of India*, December 22, 2009; 'Prachanda set for 2nd India visit to discuss "unequal" pacts', *The Economic Times*, October 19, 2009.
45. Soren, "Agenda of Prachanda's New Delhi Visit."
46. The UCPN-M became the largest party in Nepal's Constituent Assembly in 2008 elections.
47. Tamang, "The India-Nepal Peace and Friendship Treaty of 1950."
48. 'Meghalaya govt to discuss Indo-Nepal treaty with Centre', http://news.webindia123.com/news/articles/India/20110520/1754415.html (accessed May 8, 2012).
49. 'Nepal government directs ministries to halt Gurkha recruitments', *The Times of India*, March 18, 2012.

50. India's Northeastern region is known for its high literacy rate but with little employment opportunities available within the region. There exists a vicious cycle of insurgency, community conflicts, killings and underdevelopment. The lack of infrastructure development is mainly attributed to the prevalence of insurgency for decades in some states of the region and 'most problems in the region are seen through the lens of security and this myopic vision only compounds the problems' (Haokip, "Is There a Pan-North-East Identity and Solidarity," 84).
51. Bansal, "Prachanda's Visit to India."
52. Haokip, "India's Northeast Policy," 97.
53. Lyngdoh, "Ethnicity, Religion and Language."

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